

Heroes of Iwo Proud of Service

This is a postscript to a recent Herald article I wrote on the 40th anniversary of the World War II invasion of Iwo Jima.

I had interviewed ex-Marines Keith A. Renstrom and J. Murray Rawson of Orem and former Air Corps flier Owen Robertson of Provo. From contacts the article created, I now mention some additional veterans of the Iwo battle living in Utah Valley:

Merrill M. Martin, Paul J. Daniels and Donn Claybaugh of Provo; Archie T. Ward of Lakeview; Norman R. Baker of Mapleton and Dean D. Barker of Hobble Creek, all of whom served in the Navy. Also former Marines Milton M. Hall of Payson; Vernon Little, Dean J. Powell and LaMar Beveridge of Pleasant Grove, and Ralph A. Murdoch of American Fork.

Iwo Jima was only one of the Pacific battle scenes for some of these veterans. Names like Guadalcanal, Bougainville, New Guinea, Kwajalein, Saipan, Guam and Tinian also remain vivid memories for some.

Brief interviews, mostly by phone, were marked neither by boasting nor bitterness. The prevailing attitude of the men seemed to be pride in the service they gave and gratitude for the peace that was restored.

You could feel within the group the stuff from which heroes are made. Some were severely wounded in combat action and courageously accepted the consequences; others survived brushes with death or downplayed their personal risks and dangers.

A few notes from the conversations:

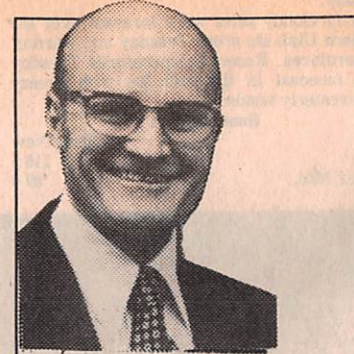
Martin, a long-time colleague of mine at the Herald and a current Provo City councilman, was a Navy radioman aboard the converted luxury liner USS President Jackson. The vessel landed invasion troops and served as an overflow hospital ship. Part of Merrill's job was establishing ship-to-shore communications.

By a rare quirk, he and Daniels, brothers-in-law, served on the same ship through several campaigns. Daniels was a radarman. Among their unforgettable memories was a fierce battle as Americans repulsed a desperation Japanese aerial attack against a large fleet of U. S. ships off Iwo Jima.

One of the inspirational stories is that of Hall. A mortar squad leader, he went ashore with the Marines on D-Day Feb. 19, 1945. He stayed throughout the campaign despite a shrapnel wound severe enough to bring him the Purple Heart.

Hall re-enlisted after War II. In the Korean War he lost both legs and a hand when a land mine blew up his truck as he was leading a convoy. Today, as he walks on prosthetic legs, he says cheerfully, "A disability is only as bad as you make it to be." Hall is vice commander of the Utah American Legion, quite a tribute to the Payson man.

Little was one of two members of a mortar squad who miraculously escaped wound-free on Iwo when an enemy shell exploded at close range. Two crewmen each lost both legs; another lost one leg and one man was killed. "Had a canister containing six rounds of our ammunition ignited, all of



N. La Verl
Christensen
Editor Emeritus

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us would have been wiped out," Vern reminisced.

Little's commanding officer, Joseph L. McCarthy, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, joined surviving American and Japanese soldiers at the recent anniversary ceremonies at Iwo Jima. McCarthy sent Vern an embossed card from Iwo, referring to his war comrades as "heroes, all."

The two Barkers are brothers. They were at Iwo on different ships — Norman on an attack transport and Dean with a destroyer crew.

Norman recalled some anxious moments when a Japanese suicide plane headed for his ship. Disaster was averted when the cruiser USS Salt Lake City shot the plane down.

Claybaugh was aboard a destroyer escort. One of his many memories deals with watching

through binoculars the historic Marine flag-raising over Mount Suribachi.

Powell suffered painful shrapnel wounds in heavy Iwo fighting. He underwent surgery aboard an APA vessel after two days of waiting ashore, eventually being placed aboard a hospital ship. He received the Purple Heart.

Ward was a motor machinist in a naval amphibious operation that involved both LST landing ships and the smaller LCTs which went ashore with equipment, supplies and sometimes men.

Despite the "sitting duck" nature of the small craft and extreme hazards in handling such cargo as bombs and high octane gasoline, Ward was never wounded. He witnessed heavy damage and casualties and was present when five enemy suicide bombers attacked a convoy of ships near Iwo Jima.

Finally, the horror of a direct hit by a suicide bomber was related by Beveridge of the 3rd Marine Division who landed on Iwo Feb. 20 and served to March 15 on reconnaissance duty without being wounded.

The LST he was aboard in a convoy at rendezvous 30 miles off Iwo was hit by the suicide plane the afternoon of the 19th in the starboard side. Over 125 Navy and Marine Corps men were killed and the tank deck was set ablaze.

It was a close call for Beveridge. "Two of us were on guard duty in the area hit by the plane," he recalls. "We had been relieved for lunch and had left that post before the disaster occurred."